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ABSTRACT

In an effort to demonstrate why good qualitative ethnography must be an equal partner in the process of building scientific knowledge, this study examined how the personal meanings assigned to the public concept of retirement affected the social actions of the elderly when they retired. The public and personal interpretations/meanings workers assign to the concept and practice of retirement were documented. Interviews were conducted with 44 persons prior to, at, and after retirement. Approximately 10% of those interviewed refused to describe themselves, or allow others to refer to them as, retirees. This category of workers who snub the notion of retirement conceptualized the whole idea and status of retirement differently than the other informants, e.g., they refused to participate in retirement ceremonies others wanted to provide for them; they did not see retirement as the end of a useful, productive life marked by the onset of dependencies and physical and mental disabilities. In previous research studies of a similar nature, adequate controls have not been provided for the effects of variable subjective interpretations of retirement. Factors which limited the number of volunteers to be interviewed in this study are briefly discussed. (RM)

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SISYPHEAN STRATEGIES FOR AGING RESEARCH:

CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON RESEARCH

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Paper Presented to American Anthropological Association meetings, Washington D.C., December 7, 1982

** Not to be Quoted Without Authors Permission **

A note of explanation: this paper is based on notes originally intended for an oral presentation. All comments and suggestions for future revisions are welcomed.

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The following paper is, in part, a reply to an attitude I encountered while working as an anthropologist in interdisciplinary and non-academic ventures. The prevailing sentiment that I encountered in these settings was that anthropologists can be good to have around because they can be counted on to have an apt story or poignant example to illustrate the 'hard' findings of the "real scientists". At one point I was accused of trying to "elevate the art of telling anecdotes to a science". I believe that ethnography is more than just the art of collecting good stories to be used as descriptive material to illustrate facts discovered by the 'real' scientists.

1.0 TOPIC

Retirement from a career job is a social event in American society publicly recognized as an overt marker of the person's entry into "old age" as a socio-cultural category. It offers a rare context for directly studying a major part of the redefinition of individuals' identities in the social process of aging. As such, retirement (as a public cultural construct) communicates important kinds of social information. This paper is concerned with the dilemas posed for research conducted within such a context. Information about who is retiring, and when, is carefully controlled in many situations. This was a factor limiting my ability to conduct the study as originally planned.

Materials drawn from my recently completed fieldwork examining the role of folk models in women's and men's retirement transitions in the Bay area of Northern California will be used to address the more general issues of how the interplay between analytic concepts and cultural constraints, both implicit and explicit, influences our knowledge of

retirement and aging in ways not fully recognized. Two aspects of the method and the implications for theory and data are evaluated:

A) What aspects or characteristics of the field setting constrained efforts to recruit informants, and how, by virtue of shaping the pool of informants, have these constraints thereby influenced the nature of the data?

B) When informants answer our questions, what questions and/or implicit propositions are they responding to? That is, who directs and frames the questions and answers in discourse, what is it we take the "data" to represent , and what are the implications?

2.0 BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE RESEARCH PLAN:

The research questioned how cultural meanings as embodied in folk models are related to social action. My goal was to elicit the personal meanings assigned to the public concept of retirement and examine how these affected (and were affected by) social actions in the course of the retirement transition, readjustments to social relationships, and personal adjustment to the new identity and status. I assumed the process and subjective impact of retiring is directly related to an individuals own interpretations of the public/preset definitions of retirement. That is, people for whom retirement has one cluster of meanings, retire and readjust in ways distinct from people assigning different cluster of meanings. In this approach, the study departed from much of previous gerontological research (as well as some

anthropological work too) which treated values and beliefs as if they were not independant factors, but somehow dispositional effects of of other more primary background factors.

Parameters for the research population were set so as to roughly control for differences in meaning. The population was screened to be: internally homogenous according to the historical period when the informants retired from work, region of residence, but more importantly homogenous according to those background variables traditionally used in the social sciences (age, income, sex, occupation, educations and etc.); and and relatively unencumbered by external factors on the pursuit of their retirement ideals, (such as health, financial or famlily obligations.

These controls would facilitate inferences about influences of subjective, but culturally patterned interpretations of retirement, as well as document the heterogeneity of meanings within the factors usually asssumed to predict homogeneity. To achieve this goal required elicitation of the components of the concept of retirement using ethnosemantic techniques. The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase was to document the public and personal interpretations/meanings workers assign to the concept and practice, while at the same time recruiting a large pool of soon-to-retire workers. From this pool using results of the ethnosemantic analysis, groups of informants could be selected to represent each of the various interpretations.

The second part of the study assessed more about each informant including their life and work history, personal, beliefs, and

experiences with the process of retiring, and evaluations of others retirements. Three interviews were conducted with each informant, several months prior, at, and several months after retirement. The interviews typically lasted about 3 to 4 hours each. Direct participation in the daily lives of several informants was made possible by extended visits of from one to four days in their homes.

After eighteen months of unending struggle only 44 acceptable informants for pre-retirement interviews could be found who would participate. That necessitated certain changes in how the controls could be utilized (described later in this paper). One of the basic reasons was the extreme sensitivity of employers and workers to sharing knowledge of when a particular worker is actually retiring until very close to the last month before their retirement.

3.0 Implicit Propositions in Interview Discourse

During the retirement study I encountered a portion of the research population who adamantly refuted to describe themselves, or allow me to refer to them as "retirees". They steadfastly maintained this assertion throughout all the interviews.

> - "Retirement is just not a word in my voacabulary, I just can not answer that question.
>
> "I find myself, every time you say that word ((retiree)) getting more and more exasperated, thinking that I just don't fit myself into that category.
>
> "I'll be retired from one job at ___ but not "retired" I'll never be a retiree myself.

Approximately 20% of the informants fit into this category. Of those, 67% are men and 24% are women. Following discovery of this set of

beliefs I asked all informants in subsequent interviews "once you have retired from your job, will you consider yourself to be a "retiree"? All in this category answered no, whereas all of the other informants replied yes. The extent to which these beliefs played havoc with the early interviews was not clear until I reviewed the transcripts later.

While analysis of the data is still underway, it appears that this category of workers who snub the notion of retirement, do conceptualize the whole idea and status differently than the other informants. That is, it is not simply that they substitute a different term for the same concept. The folk models of retirement and are not singular, monolithic notions, but are complex configurations of elements. Different models of retirement are characterized as much by different weghtings, combinations or emphasis on particular congeries of beliefs and values, as they are by the presence or absence of contrasting components. Implications of various folk models can be seen in the patterns of retiring, outlook on life, and personal adjustment. Two examples of this are evident in differences in the nature of the ceremonies at the time of retirement , and also in the folk models of the life course.

For example, among all of the informants the retirement event was marked by a variety of formal and informal ceremonies. These events customarily are organized and directed by the retiring worker's co-workers, bosses and friends. But those people snubbing the notion of retirement reverse the situation. They turned the tables and refused to participate in the retirement ceremonies others wanted to provide for them. These people organized and ran their own events, assuming control for picking who gets invited, where and when the ceremony is held, what

is served and the overall conduct of the event. They picked gifts to give to the people they had worked with, rather than vice-versa as is customary.

Those snubbing public identification of themselves as retirees explained their beliefs in part by noting that that the right to retire from a job is something that they have earned, a welcome escape from the demands and restrictions of the work world. But they do not accept the wider definition of retirement (in social contexts outside the occupational context) as the end of a useful productive life marked by the onset of dependancies, and physical and mental debilities.

A second, perhaps more important example concerns models of the social life course. Whereas in all of the folk models entry into retirement is regulated by reference to entitlements achieved through job-career credentials, exit from retirement for those snubbing retirement occures only at death --- as the next stage in the life course according to that model. Among all the other folk models for retirement, the "retirement stage" gives way to that of old age, followed by death.

This category of informants is separate from another who also refuse the notion and label of retiree, but only conditionally, rather than rejecting the idea of retirement in principle. Upon fulfillment of certain requirements they will accept the mantle of retiree, and pursue a retirement lifestyle. These conditions include:

> -- Either when they become extremely aged and decrepit so that they are no longer able to be active (mentally and physically) nor maintain physical, emotional, social or financial independance.

-- When the spouse has retired also (several months to a year or more later). About 44% of all, excluding those snubbing retirement. [m=36%, f=64%]

-- When adult children who have temporarily returned home to "refeather the nest", leave.

-- Or, along a different axis, when their occupational retirement becomes official vis-a-vis the employers payroll records. Vacation time or disability leave being used up after the official last day of work, but prior to the official retirement and termination of employment.

4.0 Has Such Phenomena Been Reported Before And How Has It Been Analysed?

Streib and Schneider (1972) in the Cornell Longitudinal Retirement Survey included one question which asked whether respondants considered themselves to be retired. But no results were reported. Results from what they called "ethnography' --- a small number of "actual cases" of retiring workers were used to provide what the authors called "striking impressions to illustrate" the statistical patterns, and so offer no useful information here.

Irelan and Bell (1972) used the Social Security National Retirement History Survey for a pilot analysis of subjective definitions of retirement. The authors reported 88% of the respondants held subjective definitions of retirement matching objective measures (e.g., number of hours worked, receipt of pension and/or social security). But 12 to 14% of the sample who reported not feeling retired, were according to objective measures, retired. Anomalies of this kind can not be accounted for within the authors analytic framework. Analysis is limited to a multivariate factor analysis using the standard factors such as age (chronological) sex, race number of hours worked and etc.

The sole manner in which subjective meanings were assessed was one question asking whether the informant felt retired or not. No other data on the informants beliefs or individual social situations was available.

Murray (1979) analysed the same N.R.H.S. data set, which by 1979 included information from protocols subsequent to the time covered by Irelan and Bell. Inherent in Murray's study are the same value judgements embedded in Irelan and Bell's. People are judged to have "reasonable" attitudes if their self definition matches that of the researcher, and "unreasonable" if it does not.

Murray also found about 15% of the respondants, who despite meeting all the objective criteria (not working, not receiving pension or s.s.) did not define themselves as retired. She tested the hypothesis that these replies represented some intermediate stages in the retirement passage, but that idea was disproved. This anomalous group of respondants persisted in their beliefs over the entire span of years covered by the N.R.H.S.

Thus, the presence of similar findings from other studies suggests that the data from my research is neither unique, nor an isolated phenomena. I propose that 15-20% of American workers hold models of retirement and the life cycle qualtitatively different than those of their peers.

5.0 Implications

I suggest that the lack of attention, both to such variations within a population, and to the role these differences have in shaping patterns of behavior, stem from erroneous a priori deductions about how members

of a society interpret and personally experience their identities and statuses, and the events defined by their cultural systems. One error is to assume a homogeneity of shared meanings and beliefs about retirement (c.f. Gubrium 1976) and/or a commonality of experience with retirement. On another level there is the pervasive bias that cognitive systems --"ideologies"-- are not independant factors shaping action, but that systematic variations in beliefs can be adequately gotten at through analysis based on standard social scientific background variables.

Past attempts to explain differences in peoples' interpretations of the concept of retirement according to these factors failed. Atchley (1974) concluded that the patterns revealed by a regression factor analysis of replies to a semantic differential on the meanings of retirement "transcended factors often producing,(or atleast related to) systematic differences in attitudes" (1974:99).

I refer those familiar with the literature on retirement and aging to the rationales behind the treatment of women in the retirement literature as illustrative of the subtle, yet pervasive influence on early knowledge of womens' retirement of such erroneous a priori a deductions about the self experiencing social identities and events (see Beeson 1974). Results from studies of people in the same occupation, or social class also reveal a wide variation in the interpretations and experiences of retirement (Lowenthal 1975, Ash 1966, Bauder 1967).

To summarize, by describing findings from a study which controlled for subjective meanings and found multiple folk models for retirement, several assumptions have been challenged about the homogeneity of

beliefs and values for retirement and the role these beliefs play in shaping the course and impact of retirement. Questions have been raised also about the extent to which previous data and analytic concepts have been confounding analytically independant factors. In the past seldom have adequate controls been provided for the effects of variable subjective interpretations of retirement (Gubrium 1974). Informants in studies, responding to implicit propositions and unintended messages inherent in the phrasing of research questions, present answers which collectively may be skewing, or masking important internal variations in our data and understandings of retirement.

6.0 Conclusions

To conclude this paper I will offer suggestions based on my experience with interviews in the study as to the kinds of data that are particularly vulnerable to being skewed in the aggregate or confounded as informants respond to implicit, distasteful connotations in the questions.

These include questions about:

----Morale, wellbeing, happiness, life satisfaction

----General life and retirement goals, values and interests

----Definitions of retirement, semi-retirement

----Evaluations of others retirements (family, friends neighbors, and co-workers)

----Conceptualizations of the life course

----Any question or discusion framed in terms of the informant becoming, or being a retiree.

On the other hand, various other questions did not seem to present troublesome implicit propositions. For example those dealing with:

----Finances

----Health

----Residence

----Stress/distress

----Work, and work history and etc.

----Quality, characteristics and meanings of social networks

A small scale intensive study of a limited number of informants offers the advantages of permitting collection of a wide range of information about each participant which can be used to cross-check their statements and set them in the proper context. It also offers the opportunity to "observe" in some limited senses how their beliefs relate to their actions in various contexts.

A drawback with small scale studies are the obvious limitations of generalizations about the distribution of phenomena found among the research population, in the wider society. Findings from this study at best can be said to suggest that the results are not unique. Another drawback is that, within the confines of this design focusing on the transition itself, I can not determine how such sets of beliefs continue to function or change much later on during retirement.

In this section of the paper I have responded to criticisms about what anthropologists have to offer. I hope to have demonstrated why good qualitative ethnography must be an equal partner in the process of building scientific knowledge.

PART II

Who becomes an informant and who does not is as much a function of the socio-cultural system in which the study is conducted, as it is the intentional choices of the anthropologist For example, the identity assigned to the anthropologist by the natives sets certain boundaries on the kinds of phenomena which can be investigated, and constraints on which can be published. The ethnography of Papua New Guinea has been criticized for being overly androcentric. This is partly a function of the fact that the sharply defined boundaries between men's and women's realms can not be easily crossed by male anthropologists. Further, it has been the experience of many female anthropologists to be classified as "males" and therefore find their access to female domains curtailed in many regards.

I will describe the constraints I encountered which severly limited the number of informants I could recruit who were suitable for the study. Because an insufficently large pool of informants was used, I could not carry out the research design fully and had to compromise on the selection criteria used.

A dilema posed by adopting a transition focused strategy for research in a modern Western society is that there are few publicly accessible sources of information, and institutional channels through which large numbers of workers can be located who will definitely be retiring within six to twelve months in one locality.

There are no overtly identifiable corporate groups of retiring workers, or formal age groups performing rituals that could become a locus for identifying informants. Given these difficulties it is understandable why more popular approaches to studying retirement have included longitudinal large scale surveys, or retirement community/residence based studies.

My main strategy was to contact workers through employers. I used a combination of tactics: large scale mailings to those over the age of 55, talks about my research during pre-retirement seminars, and word of mouth.

Both the companies, and the potential volunteers themselves were active, on their own, in selecting what they thought would be "good" informants for me; atleast as far as they thought they had understood what I wanted. "Good" meant various things. No matter how hard I pushed for mass mailings, several companies would only distribute mailers describing the study to those they felt were basically happy with the company and would not malign it. In the case of the potential volunteers I learned through several friends of friends of theirs that they did not want to take part in the study because they "were just plain folks" and had nothing exciting or different to offer.

Through trial and error I rejected many tactics for recruiting about-to-retire workers. Advertising was a failure, word of mouth was little help; being a newcomer to the research site, I lacked a large network to plug into.

The most direct means of contacting large numbers of workers was through employers. Social security records, voter registration and census materials are not available for public use. The high incidence of corporate retirees in the population slanted my data in certain ways.

Workers from larger corporations tended not only to have better financial prospectus (which was a requirement for inclusion in the study), but they viewed retirement as a release from the external pressures, schedules and sense of being a cog in a large impersonal machine.
while these perceptions were voiced to a lesser degree by the few self-employed people in the study, the data clearly is slanted away from the experiences of that portion of
the workforce which is self employed, or working in smaller companies and/or non-bureaucratic settings.

A total of over 1300 mailers containing reply cards, were distributed over the course of the study. Descriptions of the study and requests for volunteers were made at talks in front of a total of approximately 200 people nearing retirement. Twenty three companies provided varying degrees of help in contacting workers who might be interested in taking part in the study. Results are presented and discussed in the following section.

SUMMARY OF FACTORS WHICH LIMITED THE NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS

A) Institutional restrictions on channels of access to listings of retiring workers or active employees,

B) Necessity of going through employers, and their active role in selecting kinds of employees they thought that I wanted, and/or those who they thought would represent the company favorably; requirement that I follow the company's wishes as to the manner in which workers were contacted.

C) Limitations imposed on the conduct of the study by the time, and finances available to the one researcher,

D) Restrictive criteria for accceptable informants, i.e. design parameters seeking those workers retiring within twelve months after the study began, healthy, middle class, not moving away from the Bay Area after retirement,

E) Factors internal to the retirement process itself. For example: retiring workers tended to avoid making a public announcement of their intention to retire until near the actual date of retirement; variable patterns in making the transition to full retirement; bimodal distribution of retirement dates clustering around January and June for tax reasons,

F) Self-selection by workers according to their perceptions of my intentions and identity. Self-selection of workers I reached through employers as to whether certain workers be willing to cooperate

G) Contextual factors influencing the rate and numbers of workers retiring during the time I was recuiting volunteers; e.g., changes in the political and national economic climate

H) Situational factors related to the particular companies I recruited within. Recent company history regarding staff reductions/layoffs or announced plans to revise the structure of employers retirement systems,

I) Periodic business cycles such as holidays and peak work loads, which conflicted with the time necessary for recruiting volunteers,

J) Periodic extra occupational cycles, family gatherings holidays, vacations during which times workers were preoccupied and had little time to cooperate.

WORKERS RETIRING ANNUALLY IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA 1978 & 1979

	NUMBER OF WORKERS	NUMBER OF RETIREMENTS PER YEAR	PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS RETIRING PER YEAR
ALTA BATES HOSPITAL	1,400	16	1.1
AMPEX	2,000	25	1.3
BLUE CROSS OF N. CA.	2,000	14	0.7
DEL MONTE	3,600	40	1.1
FOREMOST-MCKESSON	700	12	1.7
G.T.E. - LENKURT	3,000	24	0.8
KAISER PERMANENTE FOUNDATION HOSPITALS	16,000	200	1.3
KAISER ALUMINUM & CHEM	2,000	24	1.2
LOCKHEED AEROSPACE	18,000	400	2.2
PACIFIC GAS & ELECTRIC	10,000	215	2.1
RAYTHEON	950	3	0.3
	59650	973	1.6

TABLE I: SOURCES FOR ENLISTING EMPLOYERS AND GROUPS OF WORKERS

A. Listings of local employers - obtained through public library holdings such as:
" -""San Francisco Chamber of Commerce Directory of Bay Area Employers
- Marketing Directories including "Influential Contacts 1979"

B Social and professional associations listings of lawyers, physicians, dentists professional women's groups available in the phone directories and chamber of commerce directory of clubs and professional organizations

C Directory of The Western Pension Conference (list of personnel in charge of pension plan administration for corporations in the western U.S.)

D Talks at corporate employee pre-retirement educational seminars

E Searching by word of mouth and informal networks

F Advertisements in company and community center newsletters

G Scanning company newsletters and local newspapers for retirement notices

RESULTS OF RECRUITING EMPLOYERS

Employers contacted

N = 95

Employers cooperating

N = 30

% = 31

Reasons for cooperating	N
Corporation &/or manager interested in results	12
Assist in my career training	10
Community responsibility,. social duty to help with study of a major social issue	6
None given	2

Reasons for not cooperating	N
Willing But Unable	
None retiring soon (new company/young workforce; small company;recent special benefits offered to encourage early retirements)	21
Understaffed/highworkload and too busy	10
Ill advised time due to political situation at the worksite regarding staff cuts and reorganizations upcoming	2
Unwilling	
Not interested	16
Against company policy/ fearful of violating their employees privacy	17

* I have no firm figures concerning the proportion of eligible businesses that had been contacted by the end of the research. As discussed above (pg____) it is difficult to estimate the total number of potentially suitable companies the Bay area since some have only blue collar workers or may be located beyond a sixty minute drive from San Francisco.

Response Rate to Mailers:

Employer#	Sent N	Returned N	Returned %
(3)	17	7	41
(5)	5	3	60
(8)	3	1	33
(9)	78	0	0
(13)	40	12	30
(15)	36	8	22
(16)	16	4	25
(20)	82	32	40
(21)	140	15	1
(23)	750	250	33
(24)	10	2	20
(26)	20	3	15
(28)	100	21	21
	Σ_{NA}=1277	Σ_{NA}=358	$\frac{\Sigma_{NA}}{\Sigma_{NA}}$=28%

Typical Response Rate to Seminar Talks:

Employer	Attending** N	Volunteering** N	Volunteering** %
(19)	38	11	29
(23)	35	9	26
	Σ_{NA}=73	Σ_{NV}=20	$\frac{\Sigma_{NV}}{\Sigma_{NA}}$ 26%

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